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Translator's Introduction

Why is it that, notwithstanding all the other means of investigating and ordering the world which mankind has developed, and in spite of all the reservations great poets have expressed about their own endeavor, we are still interested in literature? What *is* literature, and what is implied about our learning in general and about its history, if it must be said at this late date that something we call literature has never stopped fascinating us? Maurice Blanchot asks this question with such infinite patience — with so much care and precision — that it has come to preoccupy a whole generation of French critics and social commentators. Hence Blanchot's imposing reputation.

The list of postwar writers in France who have responded to his emphasis on the question of literature and its implications for all our questions is long and impressive. Their names are associated with the most provocative intellectual developments of recent times: not only have Jean-Paul Sartre, Georges Poulet, and Jean Starobinski written about Blanchot, not only Emmanuel Levinas, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Pierre Klossowski, but also Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe.¹ One way of indicating Blanchot's enormous importance in French thought during the last half century is by reference to Jeffrey Mehlman's commentary in the pages of *Modern*

¹A lengthy bibliography of Blanchot's works and of studies about him by others may be consulted in *Sub-stance*, no. 14 (1976), an issue entirely devoted to his writing. Here, I simply draw the reader's attention to essays by Georges Poulet, Jean Starobinski, Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, and Roger Laporte, among others, which appeared in *Critique*, no. 229 (June 1966). Jean-Paul Sartre's commentary, "Aminadab; ou, du fantastique considéré comme un langage," appears in *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947). Roger Laporte's and Bernard Noël's *Deux lectures de Maurice Blanchot* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973), should also be mentioned. Emmanuel Levinas's book, *Sur Maurice Blanchot*

Language Notes.² When Mehlman, certainly one of the most informed and lively interpreters of modern French letters to an American readership, undertakes to bring this very modernity radically into doubt, he begins with a reading of Blanchot's earliest publications: as though Blanchot's work were a key—the point to tackle. The present translation of *L'Espace littéraire*, a book from the middle of Blanchot's career which elaborates many of the issues central to his entire work, should serve to help Americans understand what is at stake in an ongoing assessment of contemporary French thought.

It would be wrong, however, to imply that Blanchot's writing has escaped until now the attention of serious readers in this country. In fact, his work has influenced a good deal of recent American criticism whose object is to question the critical enterprise itself and its relation to the nature of writing. Blanchot provides a model of literary study because, as Geoffrey Hartman says, his criticism always goes from the work under discussion to the problematic nature of literature. "He illumines, therefore, the literary activity in general as well as in this or that

(Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1975), is of particular interest; Pierre Klossowski wrote an essay of that same title which is printed in *Un Si Funeste Désir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963). For Jacques Derrida's reading of Blanchot, the reader may wish to see "Living On," in *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979). Finally, I note a volume to which Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, among others, contributed, *Misère de la littérature* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1978). Here, the essays cannot be said to be *on* Blanchot. A short piece written by him, "Il n'est d'explosion . . .," opens the book, and by implication, the "literary space" to which the authors of the following texts feel they belong.

²Jeffrey Mehlman, "Blanchot at *Combat*: Of Literature and Terror," *Modern Language Notes*, French Issue, 95 (1980): 808–29. Mehlman's essay draws attention to Blanchot's political writings during the 1930s. Indeed, between 1930 and 1940, Blanchot was an active contributor to right-wing journals in France (see Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, *Les Non-conformistes des années 30*, Paris: le Seuil, 1969). The war ended this particular—and, in light of his subsequent reputation, surprising—engagement, but not his attention to political issues. Blanchot's literary reflections after the war led him to take, notably in 1958 and in 1968, a different sort of position entirely: a leftist one. He was, for example, one of the initiators of the manifesto called *Le Manifeste des 121*, supporting the right of Frenchmen to refuse to serve in the army during the Algerian War (see the volume intitled *Le Droit à l'insoumission* [Paris: Maspéro, 1961], which assembles, around the manifesto itself, numerous texts attesting to the political debate it elicited). The relation between Blanchot's initial political views and his later ones, and the connection between these views and his critical and literary work, are very important and complicated problems which Mehlman begins to elucidate. No doubt they have significant implications for contemporary French thought in general. They require, in my view, a great deal of further consideration. I cite Mehlman's text, not as the definitive word in this matter, but primarily in order to suggest how much is generally recognized to hang upon Blanchot's writing: the very character of critical reflection in France today.

text."³ Paul de Man included in *Blindness and Insight* an important chapter on Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé in which he examines central sections of *L'Espace littéraire*.⁴ Edward Said, to give another example, refers in *Beginnings* to Blanchot's reflections on the "origin" of literature, and he too cites *L'Espace littéraire*.⁵

In order to suggest the unusual character of Blanchot's appeal and the unsettling force of his writing, we ought to include here another statement of Hartman's: "Blanchot's work offers no point of approach whatsoever"; or even this remark of Poulet's, which I translate somewhat freely: "Blanchot is an even greater waste of time than Proust."⁶ For, surely, the significance of a book like *L'Espace littéraire* lies in its constant association of literature's purest and most authentic grandeur with just such expressions as "wasted time." It presents the literary work as that which permits no approach other than wasted steps; it uninterruptedly expresses the incomparable passion which literature commands.

Its purpose, even its mission—for this is a term Blanchot somewhat startlingly employs—is to interrupt the purposeful steps we are always taking toward deeper understanding and a surer grasp upon things. It wants to make us hear, and become unable to ignore, the stifled call of a language spoken by no one, which affords no grasp upon anything. For this distress, this utter insecurity, is, Blanchot states, "the source of all authenticity."

In dreams, Blanchot says, one sometimes thinks one knows one is dreaming, but only dreams this. In the same way, the reader of *L'Espace littéraire* imagines that, alongside Blanchot, he is in search of certain answers. He is aware, he thinks, of the difficulties, the dangerous confusions, and therefore he is not at their mercy, but more than likely to see the light eventually or, in other words, to awaken. He has yet, however, to begin the dream; he has yet to see that he is in the dark.

³Geoffrey Hartman, "Maurice Blanchot: Philosopher-Novelist," *Beyond Formalism* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1970).

⁴Paul de Man, "Impersonality in the Criticism of Maurice Blanchot," *Blindness and Insight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). This essay appeared first in French in *Critique*, no. 229 [June 1966], as "La Circularité de l'interprétation dans l'oeuvre critique de Maurice Blanchot."

⁵Edward Said, *Beginnings* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

⁶Hartman, *Beyond Formalism*, p. 93. Georges Poulet: "aussi, beaucoup plus radicalement encore que Proust, Maurice Blanchot apparaît-il comme l'homme du

By the end, the reader is able to make out some important questions: What moves a writer to write? What is the origin of his undertaking, and how does this origin determine the nature of his creativity? What is the role of the reader? How is the work's meaning communicated? How do reading and writing relate to other human endeavors? How are literary, philosophical, social and political history intertwined? Certainly, one does pursue these difficult questions in the pages of *L'Espace littéraire*. One pursues them, moreover, through what are without doubt some of the most perceptive and engaging discussions in existence on Mallarmé, on Kafka, on Rilke, and on Hölderlin. This gratifying process, however, leads to where one thought it began: to the difficulties, the questions, as though they—the very obstacles along the way, marking and measuring the approach ("*l'approche de l'espace littéraire*")—had been the answers already, wonderfully transparent, though now they arise opaque and strange, and as though one were just now, when long departed deep within *L'Espace littéraire*, ready to begin approaching it.

Such paradoxes are characteristic of Blanchot's work. They present to the reader difficulties of an unusual sort: difficulties which it is difficult to confront, to encounter, problems it is hard to know one is having. Hence the uncanny ease which one also experiences. I first discovered Blanchot's critical work in a university course on fantastic literature. Ever since, it has seemed to me that complaints about his abstruse qualities express readers' premonition of the eeriest limpidity, their foreboding sense of the incredible lightness of the task before them. The muscles they have limbered up in readiness will not be necessary. To be sure, Blanchot's books take for granted a considerable erudition on the reader's part; he ranges familiarly over world literature and philosophy. But they are not aimed at experts or connoisseurs, just at readers. And reading is the simplest thing, he says. It requires no talent, no gifts, no special knowledge, no singular strength at all. But weakness, uncertainty—yes, in abundance.

It calls upon uncertainty, I was suggesting, about uncertainty itself: uncertainty about limits such as those that distinguish the dark and the light, the obscurities of the work itself and its elucidation, the inside and the outside of the text—literature and criticism. Still,

'temps perdu'" ("Thus, much more radically even than Proust, Maurice Blanchot appears as a man of 'lost time'" ("Maurice Blanchot, critique et romancier," *Critique*, no. 229 [June 1966]).

L'Espace littéraire retains plenty of the outward signs of straightforward discussion. Among its paradoxes, moreover, there are, not infrequently, aphorisms, pleasing in their definitive tone: "Art is primarily the consciousness of unhappiness, not its consolation," for example. Or: "The central point of the work of art is the work as origin, the point which cannot be reached, yet the only one which is worth reaching." In fact, *L'Espace littéraire* is practically the last book in which Blanchot allowed himself such resoundingly definite postulates. It was published by Gallimard in 1955 after a number of fictions (for example, *Thomas l'obscur*, *L'Arrêt de mort*, *Le Très-Haut*) and several critical works (notably *Faux Pas*, *Lautréamont et Sade*, *La Part du feu*).⁷ Thereafter, the relation between critical discussion and its object becomes ever more problematic and the distinction between Blanchot's own critical texts and his fictional narratives less pertinent. From *L'Attente l'oubli* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962) to *La Folie du jour* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1973) and *L'Écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), it is increasingly doubtful not only whether literature is something about which one can adequately speak but also whether there is any such thing as the literature about which we do, in any case, speak. In other words, it is ever harder to be sure that questions such as "What is literature?" or even "Is literature?" are not themselves already, or merely, literature. Is it into literature at last, or finally out of its shadowy domain, that *Le Pas au-delà* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) would step? It is not possible to say; it is possible only to retrace the step which, repetitively marking their separation, renders within and without indistinguishable. The reader of *L'Espace littéraire* will be in a good position to understand why this is the case, even if he must remain inconsolable.

In *L'Espace littéraire*, as in Blanchot's work generally, there is a continually implicit, and often explicit, reference to German philosophy: especially to Hegel, to Heidegger—whose meditation, through the works of Hölderlin, upon the essence of poetry is particularly significant

⁷All the works cited here, with the exception of *Lautréamont et Sade* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1949), were published in Paris by Gallimard: *Thomas l'Obscur* in 1941, *L'Arrêt de mort* and *Le Très-Haut* in 1948, *Faux Pas* in 1943, *La Part du feu* in 1949.

Both *Thomas l'Obscur* and *L'Arrêt de mort* have been translated into English. Robert Lamberton is the translator of *Thomas l'Obscur* (*Thomas the Obscure* [New York: D. Lewis, 1973])—or, more precisely, of the "new version" of this narrative published by Blanchot in 1950, nine years after the first edition. Lydia Davis translated *L'Arrêt de mort* (*Death Sentence* [Tarrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1978]). These are, so far, the only books by Blanchot, besides the present volume, available in their entirety in English.

for Blanchot—and to Nietzsche. Blanchot's reading of Hegel bears the distinct mark of Bataille's; likewise, he shares his approach to Heidegger with Levinas to a certain extent. And when he quotes Nietzsche's hearty praise of suicide, we should also hear an echo of Kirilov's vacillating distress.

With Hegel, Blanchot recognizes negativity as the moving force of the dialectic. It is the power that informs history; it is death, creative and masterful, at work in the world. Indeed, Blanchot hails the impending completion of this labor which is the realization of human possibilities, the unfolding of truth. And he acknowledges that this progress—whereby meanings are determined, values assigned, mysteries solved; whereby man liberates himself from the unknown and imposes his autonomous will in the clear light of day—leaves art, the preserve of ambiguities and indecision, behind, just as it suppresses and surpasses the gods, the mysteries of the sacred. The work attains its ultimate and essential form, not in the work of art, but in that work which is the gradual achievement of human mastery and freedom: history—history as a whole, the total realization of that liberating process. And yet, Blanchot's attention is dedicated to that in the work which does not fit into this whole, this culmination. He has given himself up to something belonging only to art, which will not settle for the status assigned to art by history's sovereign movement (monument to man's creativity, repository of cultural values, or object offered up to pure esthetic enjoyment). In art Blanchot hears, murmuring with mute insistence, the very source of creativity. And this source is inexhaustible. Truth and its satisfactions cannot finish off the power of negativity.

This is the point at which we can grasp the importance of Bataille in Blanchot's thought. Indeed, much of *L'Espace littéraire* reads like a conversation between Blanchot and Bataille, a conversation that continues in *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), and *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). We hear it in works of Bataille as well (in *L'Expérience intérieure*, for example).⁸ It is a conversation sustained by a common awareness of negativity as excess, foreign to purpose. Death is an infinitely futile *more*, which will not *serve* to achieve anything. Compared to this fruitless expenditure, the mastery which the use of death affords is perhaps a poor thing; in any case, it cannot use death up. Death subsists, and subsisting, proves itself to be a source of power

⁸Georges Bataille, *L'Expérience intérieure*, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), vol. 5.

that power is powerless to exhaust—a nothing that exceeds everything. Never providing anything like satisfaction, it is unspeakably desirable. Both Blanchot and Bataille tell of desire, or the *expérience* of the infinite remainder: power, reaching as high as it can, longs to reach its own possibility—death, its very source and essence—by undergoing the measurelessness of impotence. Both writers name the contradiction in such an alliance, or the intimacy of such strife, “communication.” It risks, with the unjustifiable audacity Blanchot terms inspiration, all of language, everything that might ever be communicated, and the whole world that words put at our disposal.

Thus when Blanchot borrows Hegel's perspective and addresses us as if from the end of history when all that can be has been accomplished, he does so, not to announce the truth as it discloses itself in its realized wholeness to the mind whose comprehension is likewise complete, but rather in order to make us hear what Heidegger urges: let the sole being—man—whose being stems from his capacity not to be, affirm that “not,” the most proper of all his possibilities and the one proper to him alone, the possibility of impossibility (see *Being and Time*, sec. 50). This is the possibility which everything that is possible hides; it has had, indeed, to be suppressed in order that anything be possible, in order that there be a world and the history of this world. But it must be resolutely acknowledged, if ever there is to be authenticity.

This demand is the one Blanchot associates with the work of art. The work requires death, the source, to *be* in the work; it demands that in it the ending, which initiates all beginnings, swell up as the essence of all swelling, all unfurling and flowering. It wants disappearance to come forth. It asks in other words that Being, which by receding opens the space in which beings appear, come into this clearing. The work asks that a retreat, an obscuring or effacement, show, or that the forgetfulness which inaugurates thought return to it.

Whenever Blanchot speaks about this care, this concern in the work for the origin of the work, we recognize his proximity to Heidegger. And all of *L'Espace littéraire* is imbued with care: *le souci de l'origine, le souci de l'oeuvre*, anxious solicitude for a time before the time when beings supplant being and submit to the command of the objectifying, acquisitive subject; concern for a time other than the time measured by the gradual reduction of the irreconcilably alien to the homogeneity of all that is comprehensively mastered. To the extent that in the work of art the impossible is realized as such, art alone answers, with true fidelity, to the requirement of Heideggerian authenticity. Yet there is also in *L'Espace littéraire*, as in

all of Blanchot — and this accounts for Blanchot's kinship with Levinas — concern for being's effacement itself: concern, precisely, *lest* it show, lest being be robbed of that indefiniteness, that seclusion, that *foreignness* from which it is inseparable. Together Blanchot and Levinas reverse the terms in which *Being and Time* poses the question of authenticity. Their concern is not to fail death through very resoluteness, forgetting that only forgetfulness keeps faith with it and that estrangement is its unique intimacy. The *unconcern*, however, which Blanchot locates at the very center of his concern, as well as his insistence upon the irreducibly *impersonal* character of the origin and his paradoxical way of making *breach* or *tear* synonymous with intimacy, turn this book more decisively in Bataille's direction than in Levinas's.

The estrangement from death, moreover, which Blanchot considers to be required of the writer by literature, even as literature requires of him that he greet and affirm death, determines that the writer never, properly speaking, be favored with any requirement at all. He has no vocation; he is one deprived of the very call that haunts him. That is why the quotations from Nietzsche in *L'Espace littéraire*, which almost all express the admirably bold refusal to cringe and hide from death, are presented with irony. The suicide manqué, indeed, even the baseness apparent in his inability to face death honestly — head-on — expresses more truly, perhaps, than anything else the essence of death, which is always to elude an authentic confrontation. It never presents itself for a duel, but represents itself; it comes disguising its coming. In fact, its essence is not to come at all — ever — but ever to come again. In later works by Blanchot, the Nietzsche of the Eternal Return is a constant reference. He is never cited in *L'Espace littéraire*, but he is never far.

For when disappearance appears, it is its *apparition*. Likewise, when the end begins, when it swells and blossoms as the truth of all beginnings (and that it should, we recall, is the demand Blanchot hears the work making), it is not the end itself that starts, and it is no real start that occurs. Rather, the impossibility of there ever being a first time starts over again, in the guise of an interminable ending. Then the work — at the very instant of its apotheosis, its devastating announcement that it *is*, and nothing more — subsides, engulfed in duplicity; it enters "the eternal torment of dying"; it draws the writer with it into this error which sustains no resolute being-for-death. It disguises what

reveals it and only lets itself be discovered by what perverts it. Is that why it always seems to have the innocence of something never exposed, perfectly intact? Is it like a flower just on the sheer verge of blooming because clouds of inauthenticity enfold and conserve it? No one knows, as Blanchot regularly repeats.

His writing recedes toward such questions. They are the sole answers he presumes to propose. "The authentic answer is always the question's vitality," he writes. "It can close in around the question, but it does so in order to preserve the question by keeping it open." Perhaps this is a good way of suggesting once again the character of Blanchot's work which renders it somewhat alien to us in this country, but also fascinating, like a mirror. The Anglo-American critical tradition might be said to elucidate, and thus to honor, the actual object which writers offer us. We take the work to be what artists make in the course of a labor, a struggle perhaps, to which they alone are equal; or perhaps they bring it back to us from depths to which they alone descend. Attentive to masterful technique and perfected form, we seek to comprehend the profound *achievement* of the blackest text by Kafka, say. We try to do justice to its strong and genuine character, even if we acknowledge shifty ambiguity to be the necessary vehicle of this authenticity, or recognize playfulness as the special grace of this rigorous perfection, or understand that misery is what this treasure holds, weakness what this awesome manifestation of strength has to express. But the Kafka that concerns Blanchot is the nameless young man who cannot seem to write at all. He is reduced to lamentable games. The author of *The Metamorphosis* had to suppress and surpass him. The profundity of *The Metamorphosis* is, for Blanchot, the infinite depths of uncertainty and futility which its perfection masks — which the work shows *only* by masking — but which we seem actually to see laid bare sometimes when the masterpiece, like Eurydice when Orpheus looks back, disappears.

To *see* something *disappear*: again, this is an experience which cannot actually start. Nor, therefore, can it ever come to an end. Such, Blanchot insists, is the literary experience: an ordeal in which what we are able to do (for example, see), becomes our powerlessness; becomes, for instance, that terribly strange form of blindness which is the phantom, or the image, of the clear gaze — an incapacity to stop seeing what is not there to be seen.

I do not wish to overemphasize the problems of translation which I have encountered. By comparison to many French critical texts currently being translated, this one appears quite simple: word play, for example, is not striking in it, not immediately so in any event, and it does not depend upon any unusual terminology. However, I would like to discuss here three expressions in particular because they are something like the key words of the book; they also permit me to restate in more concrete terms some of the issues I have evoked above.

The first of these expressions appears in the title: *L'Espace littéraire*. The word *espace* recurs regularly in the titles of chapters: "Approche de l'espace littéraire," "L'Espace et l'exigence de l'oeuvre," "L'Oeuvre et l'espace de la mort." It means "space," the region toward which whoever reads or writes is drawn—literature's "domain." But, although words such as "region" or "domain" or "realm" are often used to designate this zone, it implies the withdrawal of what is ordinarily meant by "place"; it suggests the site of this withdrawal. Literature's space is like the place where someone dies: a nowhere, Blanchot says, which is *here*. No one enters it, though no one who is at all aware of it can leave: it is all departure, moving off, *éloignement*. It is frequently called *le dehors*, "the outside." Here we might think again of the dreamer we evoked earlier in this discussion who, dreaming that he only dreams, falls back into the dream to the very degree that he has the impression of freedom from it: it could just as well be said that he never enters the dream at all; he only ever dreams he does. Literature's "space" is likewise inaccessible *and* inescapable; it is its very own displacement or removal. It is the space separating this space from itself. In this strange ambiguity literature dwells, as in a preserve.

Yet "in" must always be taken back, for literature's space shelters nothing within it: it is also called *le vide*, "the void." Sometimes it is associated with the anonymity of big cities, sometimes with the gap left by the absence of the gods, but sometimes, too, with what Rilke calls "the Open," or the "world's inner space," the intimacy of an expansive welcome, the inward yes which death can say in the song of one who consents to fall silent and disappear. Or it is connected with the interval, which for Hölderlin is the sacred, between gods that abandon the world and men who, likewise, turn away from God—the sheer void in between, which the poet must keep pure. Almost always, it is the origin which is anterior to any beginning, the image or echo of beginning—that immense fund of impotence, the infinitely futile wherewithal to start over and over again. Literature's space, in other words—the

void which literature introduces in place of the place it takes—is analogous to the "other time" in the time measured by achievements: sterile, inert time, "the time of distress." But the very freshness of every dawn is safeguarded in this distress and nowhere else, which is why literature demands that we return there (though this justification is never granted), risking the clear light of day in the name of sunshine, but more than just that: jeopardizing even this capacity of ours to take risks in the name of something, for some purpose.

With considerable regularity, literature's "space" is described as exile or banishment, and the writer as one wandering in the desert, like Kafka far from Canaan, too weak to collaborate in the active concerns of competent men; but then, too, the desert is a privileged zone of freedom and solitude, and if literature is exiled from the world of valuable achievements, it is also exempted from the world's demands. It has to bear no responsibility for anything; it is kept safe to itself: the desert is its refuge. Or it would be, if to be so gratuitous were not a grave danger for literature, and also if the desert were a *here* one could actually reach. Kafka is never quite convinced that he isn't still in Canaan after all.

Thus, *l'espace littéraire*, or *l'espace de l'oeuvre*, is the "distance" of the work, or of literature, with respect, not only to "every other object which exists," but with respect to itself. The work is remote from itself, or not quite itself. For example, when it isn't finished yet. But when it is done, when it comes into its own, this distance persists: it constitutes the opening of the work onto nothing but itself—this opening, this vacancy. And since the work appears, then, as pure deferral, a void or vacuum, it lends itself to being filled up with everything it isn't: with useful meanings, for example, which multiply and change as history progresses. Or this void can masquerade as the prestigious aura that surrounds the timeless masterpiece in its museum case. Yet these apparent travesties, these various ways in which the work is misrepresented and forgotten, sustain it; they protect its essence, which is to disappear. They provide it with its "space," which is *not* its location. But this is *not* to say that literature is to be found anywhere else.

I had thought of proposing as a title for this book "Literature's Remove." I hoped thereby to capture not only literature's distance from the world, and not only this distance as literature's preserve, but also that when "space" is literature's, it is space opened by that opening's absence: by the removal of that very interval, which is kept, as if for some other time, in reserve.

ve" could suggest a reflective distance, and it might be that literature involves a separation from the world permitting reflection or critical interpretation of things and events. This sense of "remove" is in fact operative in *L'Espace littéraire*. Or rather, its mirror image is. For literature's "space," Blanchot emphasizes, is the resurgence of the distance at which we must place anything we wish to understand or aim to grasp. Literature is this remove coming back to us, returning like an echo; and now it is no longer a handy gap, a familiar and useful nothing, but an unidentifiable something, the strange immediacy, foreign to presence and to any present, of remoteness itself. It grasps us, and it removes us from our power to grasp or appropriate anything whatever—especially literature.

I have, in fact, used "remove" in the body of the text as one translation of *l'écart*, of *l'éloignement*, sometimes of *la distance*, occasionally of *la réserve*. But *l'espace*, which should surely be understood as related to these terms indicating separation (and linked thus to the French word *espacement*), is always translated somewhat lamely as "space," primarily in the interests of consistency. For the word *espace* is the main constant in this book, and if, in order not to sacrifice the significance of its repetition, I had translated it, each time it appears, as "remove," there would have been certain inaccuracies. "The Space of Literature," then, seeks to preserve a semblance of what seems to have been on Blanchot's part a move to unify the book (to give it the strangest unity): to associate in the title—*L'Espace littéraire*—"l'espace de l'oeuvre" and "l'espace de la mort," the work's space and death's. *L'oeuvre* ≈ *mort* en scène de la mort?

The French text practically always distinguishes between the word *oeuvre* and the word *travail*: between the "work of art" and "work" in the sense of productive labor—man's action upon nature, his mastery and appropriation of the given. Thus, *le souci de l'oeuvre*, "concern for the work of art" (which is also the work's own troubled concern), is regularly contrasted with *le souci réalisateur*, "the concern for real achievements," which implies effective action. This real purposefulness is the process by which history unfolds, by which darkness is made to recede before the broad light of day. Man becomes free; he discovers his potentialities and fulfills them. All this takes place in what Blanchot regularly terms "the world," or on the level he calls "the worldly plane." The world is this historical process; it is its own gradual realization. But the artist is ineffectual. He has no place in the world. It is not that he belongs to what we ordinarily think of as the other world. If he is

allied to the sacred, this is because he belongs neither to this world nor to any other, but to the "other of all worlds" in our own.

He is idle, inert, "désœuvré." He is "out of work" to the very extent that his sole concern is for the work. For *l'oeuvre* is impotence endlessly affirmed. *Le travail*, on the other hand, is negativity in action, death as power and possibility.

L'oeuvre, then, immediately implies its revocation: perhaps one could say that in Blanchot *l'oeuvre* and *le désœuvrement* are translations of each other. The difference, in other words, between *l'oeuvre* and *le travail* is that while *le travail* is diametrically opposed to inaction and passivity, *l'oeuvre* requires them. Indeed, Blanchot frequently describes *l'oeuvre*, not as the union of contraries, but as their restless alliance, their torn intimacy. He treats the word *oeuvre* the way he treats the word *inspiration*: the title of the section of this book devoted to inspiration is "Inspiration, Lack of Inspiration."

I have consistently used the English word "work" to refer to *l'oeuvre*, the work of art. For *travail* I have used various expressions such as "productive or purposeful activity," "labor," "effort," "real endeavor," "effective or useful action." I have most often translated *désœuvrement* as "inertia," thereby emphasizing the paradox whereby the artist's relation to the work, the demand which he feels is made of him that there be a work, overwhelms him, not with creative powers, but on the contrary, with their exhaustion. The approach of the work does not elicit in him the strength to reach and achieve it, but immobilizes him. It calls upon his weakness, the incapacity in him to achieve anything at all; it *inspires* in him a kind of numbness or stupefaction. When Blanchot says of the writer that he is *désœuvré*, I have written that the writer is idled or out of work, thereby emphasizing how the work to be realized requires nothing of him, gives him nothing to do—perversely demands that he *do*: nothing—but also stressing how the work excludes him, sets him *outside* it. He never knows the work except as the terrible immediacy of this dismissal. It must also be understood that the work thus presents itself to him as its absence. *Le désœuvrement* is the absence of the work, "l'absence de l'oeuvre." I come closest to expressing this when I translate *désœuvrement* as "lack of work."

Occasionally, Blanchot does use the word *oeuvre* to refer to something other than the work of art: notably, to history as a whole—completed history as mankind's *oeuvre*, the total realization of

humaine en général recurs several times in section VII where, precisely, Blanchot is stressing a tendency on the part of the artist, who acknowledges only *l'oeuvre* as his task, to *confuse* this work with the work of history. Or, if he doesn't make this mistake—and to the very extent that he doesn't—his tendency to renounce his own task in favor of the other. I have translated *l'oeuvre humaine en général* as “the human undertaking as a whole,” or “the overall work of humanity.”

Finally, in three or four spots, the expressions “to be at work” (*à l'oeuvre*) and “to go back to work” (*se remettre à l'oeuvre*) appear in Blanchot's text. The writer, for example, inasmuch as he is “out of work,” can only ever return to the work (*se remettre à l'oeuvre*): reapply himself to it tirelessly and uselessly, go back to what he cannot get to—*go back to work*. Or the interminably affirmative No, which keeps on reworking all achievements, is “at work” (*à l'oeuvre*) in the work—causing its presence endlessly to revert to absence, causing this regression infernally to emerge, causing the inexhaustibly persistent presence of absence. These examples account, I believe, for all departures from the general rule: “work” always means the “work of art,” as opposed to *le travail*, just as lucidity in the deep of night means the phantom lucidity of the insomniac poet, as opposed both to the good sense of broad daylight and to the peaceful sleep, the honest oblivion, which reason requires at regular intervals.

My translation of the recurring word *exigence* is awkward. This word appears, for example, in one of the section titles quoted earlier: “L'Espace et l'exigence de l'oeuvre”; another section is entitled “Rilke et l'exigence de la mort.” What is the *demand* of death? What does the work want? *L'exigence de l'oeuvre* means not simply what is required of the artist in order to make a work of art—the skill and patience that give form and coherence—though the work does demand these. Neither is *l'exigence de l'oeuvre* simply the demand that there *be* a work, although the implications of this demand are certainly part of Blanchot's concern. *L'exigence de l'oeuvre* does mean the peculiarly harsh demand that the work makes of the “creator,” which is different from the demands of any other task: that all his powers be plunged in weakness, that he come into an immense wealth of silence and inertia. But still more, the work's demand is this: that Orpheus look back. That suddenly, desire should wreck everything—the desire to look at the dark when this naked mask is showing, and not when, veiled by clarity, clothed in the light, it can be seen.

on the verge of this ruinous look back, and yet the sole approach to that turning point is writing. The form of the work's demand is circular. It is like the demand Blanchot imagines being made of Abraham: that, having no son, he kill his son. And thus it is like *l'exigence de la mort*. What is one to do to die? More than everything is required, less than nothing is called for.

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